



## Don't Cut Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs

### by Laura Sessions Stepp

When Ruth Jones considers the congressional threat to abolish funding for a major program to prevent teen pregnancy, she thinks of herself at 15.

Twenty-two years ago, she lived in a housing project in Virginia Beach, Virginia. All of her girlfriends had babies. She didn't.

Why?

"Because I had a mentor who had begun to involve me in leadership roles," she says.

Jones became a social worker and is now lining up mentors to work with students at Ballou High School in Washington's Ward 8, one of the poorest communities in the nation's capital. Thirty percent of births to teenage girls in the city happen in Ward 8. The program Jones is involved with, only 1-year-old, is poised to reduce that number.

The Ballou money comes from the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Initiative, a program of the Office of Adolescent Health. Unlike other federal initiatives that have funded efforts to reduce teen pregnancy, this one required grant seekers to use programs that have already proven elsewhere to bring down pregnancy rates or otherwise improve risky behavior.

Ballou's program, and 101 others, are what the House of Representatives voted recently to eliminate.

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Maybe the members were cutting programs blindfolded. Or maybe they read that teen pregnancies have declined by more than a third since 1990, and decided that since the trend is moving in the right direction, the initiative's \$110 million could be better used for something else. Which makes no sense.

Automobile fatalities in the United States also have declined significantly. Does that mean Detroit has stopped designing increasingly safer cars? Of course not. When something works you keep it -- and improve it.

One hopes for wiser heads in the Senate, which is expected to discuss the prevention money early this week, when they take up the House spending proposal. Senators will undoubtedly hear that three of every 10 young women in this country will have a baby before they reach age 20, that teenage childbearing costs this country \$9.1 billion annually and that most Americans say their communities should make direct efforts to prevent teen pregnancy.

Figures like these are important but equally, if not more compelling, are stories like the one Ruth Jones tells.

Her mentor, Connie Allen, was a student at the University of Florida when she met the teenage Jones. Allen's family lived in Virginia Beach. Home on break one week, Allen was approached by a member of her church who told her she knew a promising teenage girl in the projects who could use her help.

It happened that Allen was expected to do community service for her college sorority. She started talking to Jones and eventually helped her find a part-time job in high school. A year later, she brought up the possibility of Jones going to college.

"I want you to go to William & Mary," she told her protégé. Jones was puzzled.

"You mean black kids go to William & Mary?" she asked.

When Jones graduated from William & Mary, Allen suggested she apply to the University of Pennsylvania to get an advanced degree in social work.

Again, Jones hesitated. "But that's an Ivy League school!" she said, a year before she was accepted at Penn.

As Ballou's director of external partnerships, Jones has seen well-meaning organizations come and go and is not easily impressed. But she likes what she sees in the Teen Outreach Program, called TOP, administered by Sasha Bruce Youthwork, an experienced provider of youth services in the District of Columbia.

TOP has operated in other cities for 30 years, and according to external reviews, makes a significant difference in rates of pregnancy, school suspension and course failure for the young people who complete it.

If the federal funding stands, TOP students at Ballou will learn how to set goals, manage their time, design and carry out community service projects. But the most important piece, as Jones knows from experience, may be the opportunity for these teens to work with the same teachers and other mentors from 9th grade through graduation.

Jones expects those mentors will do for Ballou kids what Connie Allen did for her: encourage discipline, raise their self esteem and enable them to imagine a future in which they have babies when they can support them.

And by the way, politically conservative members of Congress might take note: Jones says that thanks to her mentor, she still doesn't have a baby. She's waiting until she's married for that.